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Surviving the Pain of an Authoritarian Demagogue Any Way We Can

Bruce E. Levine

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Until recently, the predominant life pains that I have long seen in my psychologist day job include: abusive and neglectful parents, dysfunctional families, loveless marriages, lifelong loneliness, soul-crushing jobs, oppressive bosses, dehumanizing bureaucracies, and a variety of losses. However, the rise to power in the U.S. of an authoritarian demagogue has resulted in another major source of pain created not only by his actions but by his very being. From what I gather, many other mental health professionals are also hearing about the pains generated by him.

The pains created by the authoritarian demagogue certainly have resulted from his ICE, DOGE, and other reckless actions, but it is not his policies alone that have created pain. His very being of incessant attention-demanding self-absorption, childish petulance and cruelty, blatant lies and even more blatant stupidity create pain for many people.

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In response to his incessant attention seeking and his efforts at branding his own name on damn near everything, many people have intuitively recognized the empowering tactic of refusing to use his name when referring to him. They brand him with their own names, a sample of which I've heard include: "the idiot," "orange man," "asshole," "fuckface, and "the draft-dodging coward"—this last one used by Vietnam veteran Jesse Ventura who, outraged and disgusted by the January 6 insurrection and ICE actions in his home state of Minnesota, recently stated: "I don't call him by name. He's the draft-dodging coward."

Even more painful than his being are his directives. The mayhem and murders by ICE goon squads have obviously resulted in pain for its victims and their loved ones, but also for a large part of U.S. society who are living in fear that this can easily happen to them. And among some partners and friends who feel threatened by him, it has created conflict. Specifically, different temperaments have differing default reactions to threat—fight, flight, freeze, or fawn (comply)—and these different reactions can create disagreements; for example, a wife wants to hit the streets and protest, but her husband wants to leave the country or simply hide, and this results in tension and can cause arguments. I've been seeing that kind of thing.

So, for the last couple of years, I've been trying to help intimates and friends with different default responses to threat to not damage their relationships. Instead of polarizing arguments, I've been trying to help people have dialogue on what is the wisest response to such threats. In life, sometimes the wisest response to threat is to fight, and sometimes the wisest response is flight; and a significant number of couples are having discussions about exiting the U.S. Many people are concluding that U.S. society is paralleling 1930s Germany, and they are assessing at what point survival means hiding until one is in a better position for flight or to fight.

Perhaps, I need to do my part to motivate Cincinnati politicians to make a bid. I've authored several op-eds in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* (criticizing Cincinnati psychiatry's use of electroshock, slamming management of the Bengals and Reds, and arguing that taxpayers deserve compensation from the Republican Party for their Ronald Reagan Highway renaming of the Cross County Highway). Perhaps it is time for another op-ed. Every Cincinnati Bengal fan knows that our chant is "Who Dey, Who Dey"—short for "Who dey think gonna beat them Bengals"; and so perhaps in the spirit of civic pride, I should submit an op-ed titled: "Who Dey Think Cincy Don't Deserve Hosting War Crimes Trials."

Another major pain for many people I see in therapy is dealing with MAGA relatives who cling to their views no matter what the facts. This can be torturous. They may have an Uncle MAGA who, even though he is a policeman, is untroubled by the pardoning of January 6 insurrectionists, despite them having injured police; and he remains untroubled when a pardoned insurrectionist is found guilty of child molestation. They may have an Aunt MAGA who has a loaded revolver in her dresser to shoot rapists, but she is untroubled by the fact that by 2019, sixteen women had accused her hero of various forms of sexual assault, including rape; and that a 2023 jury found him liable for sexually abusing one of these woman. Or they may have a Grandpa or Grandma MAGA who cannot stop talking about protecting children from sexual predators, but they maintain loyalty to a man who was for many years one of Jeffrey Epstein's best friends and who, a former Epstein girlfriend reports, in front of Epstein, groped her "all over my breasts" as well as her waist and her buttocks.

So, a major topic of therapy is what to do when family events occur. Does one simply not go? What if at the family event there will be non-MAGA family members who one wants to maintain a relationship? How can one maintain one's integrity and not create unpleasantness for non-MAGA relatives when MAGA relatives start parroting the lies of their hero?

Amidst this darkness, it is important not to lose our sense of humor, though this situation does require a dark sense of humor. Here's an actual therapy proposal: When attending family events with MAGA relatives, perhaps one wears a giant body condom—psychological or literal—so as to have "safe social intercourse" and not catch the "socially transmittable disease" of "aggressive ignorance." Perhaps as part of the next *Counter-Punch* fundraising, they can sell them.

Seriously, a crucial survival tool is humor. Viktor Frankl tells us in his *Man's Search for Meaning* that even in Nazi concentration camps, "Humor was another of the soul's weapons

in the fight for self-preservation,” as humor helps one detach and rise above the absurd and even horrific situations.

Nightmares eventually end, so on the mind of many people are speculations about how the authoritarian-demagogue nightmare will end. Impeachment? An apocalyptic nuclear World War III? His junk food-induced heart attack?

My younger clientele are asking these and other questions to AI, some resulting in dark answers, and some of them resulting in dark humor. With the authoritarian demagogue’s attack on Iran (betraying supporters who trusted that he was *both* anti-immigrant and anti-war), one AI question included the words “wars of aggression” and “Nuremberg,” and the AI response was as follows:

The 1946 Nuremberg trials established that launching wars of aggression is the “supreme international crime,” differing from other war crimes by containing accumulated, overarching evil. As the first international criminal tribunal, it prosecuted Nazi leaders for planning, initiating, and waging unprovoked wars in violation of international law and treaties

Key Aspects of the Nuremberg Aggression Charges:

Definition: The Tribunal defined the crime as the planning, preparation, initiation, or waging of a war of aggression, or in violation of international treaties, agreements, or assurances.

“Supreme Crime”: The judgment declared that initiating an aggressive war is not just a crime, but the “supreme international crime” because it contains all the evil of the war that follows.

Accountability: The trials established that individual leaders, not just abstract states, can be held criminally responsible for their actions.

Specific Aggressions: Charges focused on the invasion of Poland, Denmark/Norway, the Low Countries, Yugoslavia, Greece, the Soviet Union, and the declaration of war against the United States.

Defendants: Key leaders convicted for these acts included Hermann Göring, Wilhelm Keitel, and Alfred Jodl.

Legal Precedent: This established a new, binding precedent in international law, rejecting the defense that these actions were legal under domestic law or protected by sovereign immunity.

This AI response led to a discussion of what U.S. city will get to host our war crimes trials. Will U.S. cities compete and bid in the same manner that they vie for the Democratic and Republican conventions?

Where I live in Cincinnati, we have had a history of losing out on conventions because of our inferior convention center and lack of hotel rooms, and so the city has been aggressively trying to remedy that, including doing its best to gentrify its downtown by removing as many poor people as possible.

I believe Cincinnati has an edge in hosting the war crimes trials, at least to the extent that those having a say will be Europeans who like the idea of a Germanic symmetry. Cincinnati has a proud German heritage, taking pride in having the largest Oktoberfest in the United States, Oktoberfest Zinzinnati, second largest in the world behind only Munich. Furthermore, the downtown neighborhood that is being most gentrified is actually called Over-the-Rhine (OTR).